



Isabelle Backouche. *La trace du fleuve. La Seine et Paris (1750-1850)*. Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2000. 430 pp. (paper), ISBN 978-2-7132-1351-9.



Reviewed by David Garrioch (School of Historical Studies, Monash University, Australia 3800)

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The Seine and Paris: what a wonderful subject! An opportunity to take a slice through the life of the city, just as the river itself flows through the centre of Paris. To examine the city from a new angle, at once as a whole and from a particular perspective. And to reach a wide public, for it is a subject that catches the imagination. To be done effectively and comprehensively, it requires very diverse skills: those of the economic historian, for the Seine was central to the provisioning of Paris and to its economy; those of the social historian, alert to the daily life of the water and its banks and bridges; those of the art historian, to interpret visual representations of the river; skills of the urban geographer, able to place human activity in its physical context. Not least, the topic requires considerable research ability, because it cuts across conventional divisions of source material, not least if one is brave enough—as Isabelle Backouche has been—to traverse the great divide of 1789, and even more to venture across the first half of the nineteenth century when the sources are far harder to track down amid changing administrations and in territory less well trodden by historians. This book in some ways exceeded my expectations; in other respects, perhaps inevitably given the scale of the undertaking, I was disappointed.

The time frame, 1750 to 1850, is unusual, and at first glance looks arbitrarily chosen. In reality, Backouche

covers a longer period, and the opening date might well have been 1700. Yet 1750 makes sense as a starting point because that decade and the following one marked a significant turning-point in official attitudes towards the river and its uses. Until then, the Paris Municipality had attempted simply to balance competing uses of the river, accommodating all to a greater or lesser extent. The Seine was both water supply and waste disposal, and its banks bore an astonishing weight of public buildings: the City Hall, the central hospital, the cathedral, the main courts, prisons, and police administration, the Louvre, the Arsenal, and more. It was a site for festivities, fireworks and displays. It was a crowded commercial space: places on the banks were in demand by merchants unloading and selling different sorts of produce, but also by the riverside activities of dyers, butchers, and leather-dressers. People lived and worked in houses built on the bridges and banks, literally overhanging the water. Shopkeepers and artisans competed with hawkers and stalls for spaces on the bridges and ports that were among the most frequented and hence commercially valuable in Paris. The water-carriers too demanded access to the water, and so did the laundrywomen—there were up to 2000 places on the laundry-boats in 1737 (p. 33). On the river itself there was insufficient room for all the barges, passenger craft, the wood trains, the floating mills, the laundry boats, and the increasing numbers of bathing establishments.

After about 1750, Backouche suggests, the city authorities became far more proactive, planning and shaping the river space in ways that were to transform the relationships between the city and the Seine. The most dramatic manifestation of the new approach was the global scheme for the refurbishment of the river banks that was developed primarily by the head of the Municipality, Viarmes, and the city architect Moreau-Desproux. Obtaining royal approval in 1769, it was the first general plan for the future development of the city and anticipated that of the Commission des Artistes of 1796, which has generally been credited as the earliest such attempt. And unlike the later plan, the 1769 scheme was very largely implemented, despite the financial difficulties both of the monarchy and of the City of Paris. It envisaged the destruction of the houses on the bridges and river banks—over 500 of them—the construction of a series of stone quais, and the widening and paving of all the adjoining areas. The financial and social costs were huge.

Backouche tells this story in detail. She explains the ways in which the 1769 plan departed from previous usages and earlier projects, and places it in the context of the multifarious urban reform projects of the 1770s and 1780s. It implied an overall vision for the city centre, contrasting with the former piecemeal approach to practical problems. It attempted to beautify the city, at the same time facilitating the commercial uses of the river and meeting the growing demand to be able to move freely around and across the city: the river and its environs represented a major bottleneck. And it represented a clear decision to privilege traffic—both fluvial and road-based—over the multiple uses of the river as a living space. It gave priority to a newly-imagined 'public interest', over the 'private interests' represented by individual merchants and riverside establishments. The debates and resistance surrounding the new approach provide a window onto competing ways of thinking about the river and the city as a whole and onto the political life of Paris in the late eighteenth century.

The second date, 1850, also makes perfect sense in terms of the history of the river. If the 1820s saw the most intensive canal building, and hence diminished the importance of the Seine in the life of the city, the 1840s witnessed the coming of the railway and the massive transfer of freight from water to land. By then, the process of making the river into a highway was virtually complete. The retail traders had been removed from the river banks and pushed into specially designed covered markets elsewhere in the city. The floating mills had gone, the num-

ber of laundry boats was declining rapidly, the key ports had been transferred away from the city centre, and the high quais turned the river itself into a canal. The process that began in the middle decades of the eighteenth century was now complete.

The research underlying all of this is very impressive, and the general argument is amply substantiated. There are a great many observations made along the way that shed light on little-known aspects of the history of Paris during this period. The activity of the Old Regime Municipality, in particular, has been neglected by historians of the city. Here, the immense work done by its officials—as well as its defence of its prerogatives against other agencies—is amply demonstrated. This book also represents a valuable contribution to the economic history of Paris, revealing the growth in river trade and the gradual development, over a long period, of an export trade. There are many other insights: Backouche points to the growing role of engineers, who by the 1840s were firmly in control of the river, displacing merchants and even the architects who had formerly played an important part. Just occasionally, Backouche presents as peculiar to the Seine and its administration developments that were taking place in the city more broadly. But for a historian of Paris, there are discussions of many minor and little-known aspects of the city's history, from the floods of 1740 through to the administration of the Samaritaine pump, the socio-economic composition of the population living on the bridges, and the debates over steam pumps. The book is abundantly illustrated, and many of the maps, in particular, are very interesting.

Nevertheless, this is primarily a history of urbanism. Having evoked the multifarious and competing river activities in the first section, and except for a section on the struggles for compensation by tenants and owners of houses demolished in the 1780s, Backouche focusses firmly on projects and plans and there is little more on river life. While this fits in with the overall argument that such activities were increasingly sidelined, it exaggerates the speed at which the process took place. There were as many laundry-boats in 1805 as there were in 1723, we learn in an aside (p. 319). Furthermore, they went on being centres of festive and community life: Alain Faure has described their role in Carnival celebrations of the first half of the nineteenth century.^[1] The water carriers remained into the second half of the nineteenth century. The riverside lodging houses and their shifting populations were still there in the 1840s.

I was disappointed that some attention was not given

to aesthetic appreciations of the river. Although Backouche refers to plans designed to beautify the river banks, the dramatic shift in the way educated people began to think about landscape, rivers, and cities in the second half of the eighteenth century is not acknowledged.[2] Some attention to aesthetic considerations might also lead one to question the assertion that the Seine 'loses its power of attraction for Parisian society' (p. 263). One has only to read Louis-Bastien Mercier's celebration of the river views available after the demolition of the houses on the bridges to suspect that for many Parisians the Seine exerted a greater, not a lesser fascination. It certainly became far more visible: until then it was possible to cross most of the bridges repeatedly without ever seeing the water, a point Backouche might well have considered! And since the aesthetic appreciation of water was directly relevant to urban planning, one would expect a chapter entitled 'Un nouveau regard sur le fleuve' (a new way of looking at the river) to devote some space to it.

While the nature and evolution of the long-term changes taking place is well documented in *La trace du fleuve*, the explanation for them is not clearly articulated. Much of the argument proceeds through binary oppositions, a common and acceptable explanatory device, but one that runs the risk of oversimplifying. Many of the changes are presented in terms of two competing views of urban space, or as a 'new conception of urban space' confronting 'old usages', almost as if the new urbanism was an explanation in itself. I found myself asking what was driving the process. Why were these particular solutions adopted? Admittedly, Backouche is sensitive to political issues, notably the importance of the river in justifying the very existence of the Paris Municipality; and, after 1800, the rivalry between the Prefect of Police and the Prefect of the Department of the Seine. At times, too, she points to financial constraints or the desire to glorify the monarchy. Yet these are mainly cited as reasons for the failure of the new views to carry the day immediately. The principal explanation for the longer-term changes in policy and planning seems to be the overcrowding of the river and concern about food supply: Backouche refers repeatedly to the 'saturation' of river space (no pun intended, I'm sure!). She demonstrates the growth in certain kinds of activity and the competition for space, yet given that river activity seems to have continued to grow in the 1770s and 1780s, after the key urbanistic ideas of the planners were all in place, it is not clear at what point 'saturation' was reached or that this was the primary motivation. Nor were their plans by any means confined to the river. Certainly, in the minds of decision-makers

in the Municipality and the royal government, the interests of commerce were an important consideration. Yet the merchants themselves have little role in Backouche's story, except occasionally in an obstructive role, and they seem repeatedly to have been pushed aside by engineers and urban planners, who remain the key actors throughout. The development of capitalism is not part of the explanatory framework-though it could have been, given what the book reveals about expanding river trade and growing concentration in certain river industries. And there is next to nothing in the book about changing social practices. At the risk of seeming materialist, I would suggest that some of the key changes in Parisian society, not least the development of an increasingly educated and informed middle class and the changing social practices of the urban elites (including the medicalisation of society), were important factors (Backouche mentions medical arguments but gives them little emphasis).[3]

The book could have done with a strong editorial hand. Few readers—even specialists in the history of Paris—will want to plough through the detail and the multiplication of examples in some sections. Quite a few of the tables and lengthy quotations, too, do little to strengthen the argument and could readily be dispensed with. There are a number of digressions into urbanistic debates—such as that over the rebuilding of the central hospital after a fire—that (as presented here) do not have a lot to do with the central themes of the book. In places, too, the prose needs attention: the use of the phrase 'espace fluvial', sometimes several times on the one page, gets very monotonous, and in phrases such as 'l'écatement de l'espace fluvial' borders on meaningless.

Nevertheless, I greatly appreciated two aspects of this book. One—of particular relevance to Paris—is Backouche's recognition of the importance both of the 1750s/1760s and of the early nineteenth century as key turning points in the city's history. Both periods have been relatively neglected by historians. The other aspect, of broader relevance, is its stress on the close rapport between urban geography and urban history. Rivers, along with other aspects of the natural environment, are often overlooked by urban historians, yet they were central (both literally and figuratively) to the life of cities. The transformation of the role of the Seine and of official ways of thinking about the river, the debates and the precocious urbanism that Backouche describes, will be of interest to those working on many other cities.

[1]. Alain Faure, *Paris Carême-prenant Du Carnaval*

À Paris au XIXe siècle (Paris, Hachette, 1978).

[2]. Donald Charlton, *New Images of the Natural in France. A Study in European Cultural History, 1750-1800* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984). See also *RÃ©tif de la Bretonne et la Ville* (Strasbourg, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg, 1993).

(3) Colin Jones, "Pulling Teeth in Eighteenth-Century

Paris", *Past and Present* 166 (May 2000): 100-45

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